



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthai Óige
Department of
Children and Youth Affairs

HOW WE SEE IT

Report of a Survey on **YOUNG PEOPLE'S BODY IMAGE**



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Minister's Foreword

The *How we see it: Survey on Young People's Body Image* was conducted by young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council and marks an important milestone in giving young people a voice on matters that affect their lives.

The importance of body image as a major influence on teenagers' mental health emerged as one of the key recommendations from Dáil na nÓg 2010. In following up on this recommendation, the young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council, acting in response to the lack of any publicly reported national data on teenagers' body image, decided to develop a survey to ask young people how they perceived their body image. After receiving training in research methods and ethics, the members of the Dáil na nÓg Council administered the Body Image Survey to more than 2,000 young people from all around Ireland at the 2011 Comhairle na nÓg Annual General Meetings. In total, 2,156 young people, aged between 10 and 21 years, completed the survey.

The recommendations made by the young people who completed the survey include the need for a positive body image awareness campaign aimed at teenagers, and the role of schools in imparting information, incorporating body image into the mainstream curriculum, making sports more exciting and varied, having regular talks on personal development and providing healthy food options in canteens and vending machines.

The findings from the survey indicate that body image is very important to young people in Ireland, with 77% ranking body image as important to them. The survey found that positive body image rapidly declines throughout the teenage years and negative body image is considerably more prevalent among girls than boys.

Although initial impressions suggest that young people have relatively high body image satisfaction, some contradictory findings emerge. While a majority of all participants say that they are satisfied with their body image, almost 2 in 3 say they feel pressurised to look good for other people, and more than half say that comparing themselves with others impacts negatively on their body image and that their body image interferes with their participation in activities such as swimming, dating and putting photographs on Facebook.

I am pleased to see that 97% of the young people surveyed take part in some form of exercise and that activity and sports were cited as important in supporting positive body image.

When asked about what influences their body image, comparison with others ranks as the most negative influence on girls' body image and bullying as the most negative influence on boys' body image.

This study has given us new insights into how teenagers perceive themselves in an area of critical importance to their mental health, and challenges decision-makers to more effectively meet the needs of young people. I look forward to working with my Government colleagues in addressing the important issues highlighted in this study.

Frances Fitzgerald, TD
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Acknowledgements

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We also wish to acknowledge the ongoing and invaluable support and guidance provided to us by the staff of the Citizen Participation Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in particular Anne O'Donnell and Liz Harper, and the work of Angela O'Connell and Shirley Martin from University College Cork in assisting us throughout the research process.

Members of the Dáil na nÓg Council

Sinead O'Kane	Carlow Comhairle na nÓg
Áine Farrelly	Cavan Comhairle na nÓg
Micheál Ó hÓgáin	Clare Comhairle na nÓg
Niamh Duggan	Cork City Comhairle na nÓg
Patrick O'Sullivan	Cork County Comhairle na nÓg
Laura Buchanan	Donegal Comhairle na nÓg
Jessica Dowdall	Dublin City Comhairle na nÓg
Tom Leahy	Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Comhairle na nÓg
Owen Costello	Fingal Comhairle na nÓg
Saoirse Houston	Galway City Comhairle na nÓg
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Colm Galligan	Monaghan Comhairle na nÓg
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The Research Support Team

Dr. Angela O'Connell is an independent research consultant and trainer, currently working in the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork on the project 'Young People as Social Actors: An examination of young people's perspectives on the impact of participation in DCYA initiatives', which is funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS). Angela has worked as a consultant for over 10 years in the community and voluntary sector, specialising in socio-economic disadvantage and youth issues. Prior to that, she worked for many years in higher education equality, mature student support and adult community education. She has previously conducted research on behalf of the Department of Education and Science, the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, RAPID, Foróige, Cork County Council, Cork City Development Board, Waterford City Development Board, Waterford Childcare Committee and Wexford Vocational Education Committee.

Angela holds a PhD from the School of Political Science and Sociology, National University of Ireland, Galway, in addition to a Master's degree in Women's Studies and a Bachelor's degree in English and Philosophy, both from University College Cork.

Dr. Shirley Martin has been a lecturer at the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, since 2004. Previously, she worked for two years as a School Completion Co-ordinator with the Department of Education and Science in the Dublin 22 area. Currently, she lectures in Social Policy on the BA Early Years and Childhood Studies degree and Research Methods on a number of undergraduate and postgraduate courses.

Shirley's main research interest is in the well-being of children and the focus of her research relates to key areas of children's lives, such as early years care and education, educational disadvantage and participatory research with children and young people. She is the Primary Investigator on an IRCHSS RDI project entitled 'Young People as Social Actors: An examination of young people's perspectives on the impact of participation in DCYA initiatives'.



Executive Summary

The Dáil na nÓg *How we see it: Survey on Young People's Body Image* marks an important milestone in researching one of the key concerns of young people in Ireland. This innovative, peer-led research project set out to gather information about the sorts of things that affect young people's body image in Ireland today. The research was conceived and designed, and the questionnaire administered by young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council, with the support of the Citizen Participation Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and a research team from University College Cork.

The importance of body image in influencing mental health among teenagers emerged as one of the key recommendations from Dáil na nÓg 2010. In following up on this recommendation, the young people from the Dáil na nÓg Council examined the *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2010* report and discovered that there is no publicly reported national data on teenagers' body image. They decided to develop a survey to ask young people how they perceived their body image. After receiving training in research methods and ethics, the members of the Dáil na nÓg Council administered the Body Image Survey to more than 2,000 young people from all around Ireland at the 2011 Comhairle na nÓg Annual General Meetings (AGMs). In total, 2,156 young people, aged 10-21 years, completed the survey.

The findings from this survey clearly demonstrate that body image is a burning and complex issue for young people in contemporary Ireland, with 77% of participants ranking body image as important to them. Key findings include:

- Two out of 3 participants say that they are fairly or very satisfied with their body image, but gender appears to play a causal role in generating negative body image. More than twice as many boys as girls are satisfied with their body image (22% male; 8% female), while girls express considerably greater dissatisfaction with their body image than boys (26% female; 10% male).
- Positive body image rapidly declines throughout the adolescent years. In this survey, 15-year-olds are least satisfied with their body image.
- Comparison with others ranks as the most negative influence on girls' body image.
- Bullying is identified as the most negative influence on boys' body image.
- More than half of all the young people surveyed say that comparing themselves with others impacts negatively on their body image.
- 85% of the girls in the survey put time into their appearance compared with 54% of boys.
- 60% of all participants say that they feel pressurised to look good for other people. Girls (70%) are far more likely to say this than boys (46%).
- More than half of all the young people surveyed say that their body image interferes with their participation in certain activities (such as swimming, dating, putting photographs on Facebook). Girls are up to twice as likely as boys to find it harder to take part in *all* of the listed activities.
- Although positive body image is higher among boys at every age, this research has highlighted instances of excessive exercise and use of body-building supplements among some teenage boys.
- 97% of the young people who took part in the survey do some type of exercise, and activity and sports were cited as most important in supporting positive body image.

1. Introduction to Dáil na nÓg Body Image Survey

Arising out of international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), governments are recognising that young people's lives need to be better understood. Article 12 of the UN Convention explicitly states that **children should have a right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and that these views should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.**

Increasingly, it is recognised that by becoming centrally involved in researching their own lives, young people can improve the chances of their views being considered useful to those who make decisions concerning their lives (Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 137; Kellett, 2009, p. 52). As well as this, involving children and young people centrally in the research process brings benefits to the participants as well as benefits to the research itself. Young people researching issues that are relevant to their own lives have better access to their peers, first-hand knowledge of youth cultures and can often formulate more youth-appropriate questions in language that young people can relate to (Kirby and Bryson, 2002, p. 20).

Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in September 1992 and since then it has been Government policy **that children and young people will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.**

The work of the Citizen Participation Unit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is guided by Article 12 of the UNCRC, ensuring that children and young people under the age of 18 have a voice in the design, delivery and monitoring of services and policies that affect their lives, at national and local level. The *Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship* (2007) also promotes the need for all citizens, including children and young people, to become involved in social and community life. The work of the DCYA is undertaken through the development of effective structures for children's participation in decision-making, conducting consultations and dialogues with children and young people, development of evidence-based policy in keeping with national and international best practice, and partnering with statutory and non-governmental organisations.

All the work of the DCYA is informed by the belief that children and young people are not just the adults of tomorrow, but the citizens of today. The DCYA works in partnership with children and young people and has found that since 2000, its practice has changed and improved through increasing understanding of the needs, concerns and interests of young people. The Department is committed to ensuring best practice, robust and evidence-based outcomes, and the inclusion of seldom-heard children and young people in participation structures and initiatives.

Since 2000, the DCYA has established Comhairlí na nÓg (local youth councils) in each of the 34 City and County Development Boards, and a national youth parliament, Dáil na nÓg, drawn from Comhairle members. These structures bring young people together within their communities and nationally, enabling them to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives and the lives of the young people they represent.

Dáil na nÓg is the annual national parliament for young people aged 12-18 years. The DCYA funds and oversees Dáil na nÓg, which is hosted annually by the Minister for Children and Youth

Affairs. Delegates are elected to Dáil na nÓg by each of the 34 Comhairlí na nÓg. Successive independent evaluations note that Dáil na nÓg has gone from strength to strength, with more challenging and contentious debate each year.

One representative from each Comhairle na nÓg is elected to the Dáil na nÓg Council, which follows up on the recommendations from the Dáil and works towards making changes for young people in those areas. The Council, which has a term of office of two years, meets once a month and members are facilitated and supported by staff from the DCYA, who ensure that they get the opportunity to engage with appropriate Ministers, policy-makers, Oireachtas Committees and other decision-makers.

The role of the Dáil na nÓg Council is:

- :: to identify key areas of work from the Top 3 recommendations agreed at Dáil na nÓg;
- :: to conduct research into the issues identified;
- :: to meet with relevant Ministers, TDs, Government officials, policy-makers and other stakeholders to seek their support in making changes for young people on the issues identified;
- :: to provide feedback to their Comhairle na nÓg on the work of the Council;
- :: to represent Dáil na nÓg at conferences and other events.

At Dáil na nÓg 2010, held in Croke Park in Dublin in March 2010, 'Body Image' was identified by delegates as an issue of major concern in relation to young people's mental health. The key recommendation from the delegates was that **the Government should enforce a law that all altered advertisements and images must indicate that they have been altered by means of a symbol and text, because of the negative impact of such images on teenagers' body image.** In following up on this recommendation, members of the Dáil na nÓg Council examined the DCYA's report *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2010* and discovered that there is no publicly reported national data on teenagers' body image. They realised that in order to move forward on this issue, they needed to discover the key influences on body image among Irish teenagers.

Body image can be influenced positively or negatively by a variety of factors, including gender and age, family and peers, media images, fashion industry practices, celebrity culture, and voluntary and compulsory participation in sports and exercise, as well as by the availability of information and supports. Significantly, coordinated national strategies seem to work. The Australian Government's 2009 *A Proposed National Strategy on Body Image* was shown to have had a positive impact on the body image of those young people whose schools implemented the programmes it outlined. For example, the Strategy's *Checklist for Body Image Friendly Schools* covered body image-friendly school and sport uniforms which are designed in consultation with students; ensuring students are not weighed or measured in any school context; providing balanced food options to students; displaying posters that show a variety of body shapes, sizes and ethnicities; providing training for staff and teachers in relation to body image; and providing relevant information for parents.

Members of the Dáil na nÓg Council were involved in developing a questionnaire to explore how body image is perceived by young people in Ireland and the Citizen Participation Unit worked with them up to the point where they felt the project would benefit from outside experts who would progress the research to the highest standard of evidence-based research. A team from the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork (UCC), was commissioned to work with the young people in further developing their questionnaire. The team from UCC, informed

by a review of the literature in the area of body image, delivered training in research methods and ethics, and supported Council members throughout the research process and through the analysis and writing up of the findings from the survey.

After receiving training in research methods, the Body Image Survey was administered by Dáil na nÓg Council members at every Comhairle na nÓg AGM in 2011. These AGMs draw young people together from every background – urban and rural, islands and Gaeltacht, schools, Youthreach centres, Scouts and Guides and various other youth organisations. Included in these gatherings are young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, young people from the Traveller community, young lesbian and gay people, young people with disabilities, young people in care, and young people from New Communities. In total, 2,156 young people, aged 10-21 years, completed the survey. As a result, the findings are representative of a wide range of viewpoints and experiences, and thus present a comprehensive account of the body image concerns of young people in Ireland today.



2. Background and Methodology

Body Image: A core issue for young people

The 2010 Dáil na nÓg was held on 5th March 2010, in Croke Park, Dublin, and was attended by 225 young people from all over Ireland. At the meeting, 'Body Image' was voted No. 1 priority under the Mental Health category, and one of the two main areas of focus identified for the Dáil na nÓg Council's work over the coming year was to work towards ensuring that advertisements that have been airbrushed must display a symbol indicating that they have been altered.

In an attempt to fight the spread of eating disorders, Israel introduced a law in March 2012 banning images of overly thin models being used in local advertising and requiring publications to disclose when they use altered images of models to make them appear thinner than they really are (as reported in *The Irish Times*, 20th March 2012).¹ However, the Dáil na nÓg Council felt that the widespread consumption of UK and US media among young people in Ireland would make such legislation less effective here. As they began working on the airbrushing campaign, they realised that it would be impossible to add symbols to all advertisements in the Irish media since the vast majority of these ads are produced outside of Ireland, for example, in imported UK magazines and newspapers, television and Internet images. So the Council decided to take a different approach to the topic of body image.

Although international research suggests that body image is a burning issue for young people in Ireland today (HBSC, 2010, p. 18), when the Dáil na nÓg Council examined the DCYA's latest report on *State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2010*, they discovered that there is no publicly available national data on teenagers' body image. As a result of this discovery, they decided that they needed to conduct some research to find out what matters to young people in Ireland in relation to their body image. From this, the current study emerged.

Given the lack of data on young people's body image in Ireland, the Dáil na nÓg Council decided that it would be really useful to find out how young people see themselves and how they think others see them. With this in mind, they chose a survey method to assess young people's perceptions of, and attitudes towards, body image and they set to work to design a questionnaire.

Questionnaires are often popular with young people. They can cover large populations and when appropriately designed, they have the potential to capture detailed information and can also allow for the inclusion of open questions that ask for a more detailed response. Some disadvantages of using questionnaires are that they can be expensive to produce and administer, can cause problems for those with literacy difficulties and may just be disliked by some people (Borland *et al*, 2001). The Council felt that a short, informative, eye-catching questionnaire was the most effective and suitable tool to gather sensitive information from a large number of young people, and that if carefully designed, could address privacy and confidentiality issues more appropriately than other methods, such as face-to-face interviews or focus groups.

'There is competition to look well between friends – with boys too, weight-lifting and drinking protein drinks.'

Dáil na nÓg Delegate, 2010

¹ See www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2012/0320/breaking17.html

The Council decided that the questionnaire should be completed at all 34 Comhairle na nÓg AGMs around the country since these would be gatherings of young people in the age range 12-18 from each county, thus providing a potentially large sample of over 2,000 young people for the survey. The young people attending these AGMs are drawn from all backgrounds – urban, suburban, rural, islands, Gaeltacht, schools, Youthreach centres, youth clubs, Scouts and Guides and other organisations working with young people – and so represent a very broad array of perspectives and experiences across a wide range of age groups.

The information gathered from the Body Image questionnaire promised to provide a wealth of data in relation to young people's issues around body image. Using this information together with participants' suggestions for strategies to raise awareness, the Council could make recommendations for actions to improve body image among Ireland's young people.

Designing and administering the survey questionnaire

The Council put together a list of questions that they wanted to address, but as they worked on the questionnaire, they felt that the project would need outside expertise if it were to produce data that could be used to influence policy. As a result of this, the Citizen Participation Unit of the DCYA invited in a team of researchers from the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork (UCC), to help facilitate the Council in completing the wider research project within its term of office.

As well as providing support to the Council as they developed the survey questionnaire, the UCC team provided training in peer research methods to Council members. This training focused on skills in administering questionnaires and awareness of ethical issues, such as consent, dealing with sensitive topics in research, confidentiality and providing avenues of support for participants, where needed.

A series of meetings between the research support team, staff from the Participation Unit and the Council, over a 4-month period in early summer 2011, progressed and refined the initial questionnaire. During discussions in relation to ethics in research and international good practice, the group decided that the phrasing of some of their initial questions might be inappropriate for some of the target age groups, while other questions might cause embarrassment or discomfort for participants who would be filling out the questionnaire in a relatively public setting (see Felzmann *et al*, 2009 for a discussion of young people's exclusion from ethical processes in participatory research with young people). A number of questions also needed to be expanded to gather information which the group felt would be necessary if a full picture of young people's views on body image were to result from the survey.

This series of sessions resulted in a final-draft 3-page questionnaire, designed for maximum visual impact, ease of use and confidentiality. The final version of the questionnaire was approved by a sub-group of Council members, who met to finalise the design and send proofs to the printers in August 2011.

The survey questionnaires were administered by Dáil na nÓg Council members at each of the 34 Comhairle na nÓg AGMs in Autumn 2011. A total of 2,156 questionnaires² were completed and returned to the UCC researchers for inputting of data and preliminary analysis.

² The total number returned exceeded 2,400, but this included more than 200 blank questionnaires and approximately 50 'spoiled' questionnaires.

Methodology to analyse data with young researchers

The completed questionnaires were input into a computer statistics package (SPSS) to enable the large amount of data to be processed. Preliminary findings were brought back to the Dáil na nÓg Council at a workshop on 18th February 2012 for discussion and analysis, using a Consensus Workshop³ Method. This method uses a highly structured interactive series of steps towards reaching strong consensus, in this case to highlight areas of focus for the final report. These areas emerge from an examination of the raw findings, when participants look for existing trends and correlations, and suggest cross-references for further investigation. The major strength of this method is that it creates a real sense of ownership of decisions because it honours all ideas, insights and perspectives in the final decisions that the group makes.

At this workshop, a number of suggestions relating to data analysis were agreed upon. Themes which were identified as particularly important to focus on in the report included:

- :: age and gender;
- :: influences on body image;
- :: participation in sports and exercise;
- :: artificial/unnatural enhancers;
- :: effects of body image;
- :: ideas to spread awareness of the issues.

In terms of making the findings from the survey available for others, it was agreed that they needed to be presented in an attractive, informative yet concise format for young people, and that there should also be a full report for policy-makers.

A sub-group was selected to work with the research support team and the report was progressed over a number of weeks. At the end of this period, the draft was circulated among the whole group who then met to agree the final layout of the document and to discuss ideas for progressing the recommendations.

³ Technology of Participation® Group Facilitation Methods, Institute of Cultural Affairs, UK.



3. Literature Review

Body image in an international context

There is a growing body of research in Western and developing cultures demonstrating that teenagers, and teenage girls in particular, are worried about body image (Swami *et al*, 2011), although earlier studies also indicated an increasing concern with body image among boys (Hintikka *et al*, 2000; Grogan and Richards, 2002). Negative body image is associated with poorer mental well-being, eating disorders, self-harm, acceptance of plastic surgery, smoking, use of anabolic steroids and dieting aids, excessive exercise, becoming the target of teasing and bullying, and developing a lack of confidence in interpersonal relationships. Fear of being seen as gay or lesbian (homophobia) in defining both male and female bodies, and in policing behaviour, is also implicit in many of the studies.

Swami *et al* (2011) note the role of the media in representing a particular idealised body type which is slender, physically attractive and athletic. This idealised body image and its basis in celebrity culture can result in the desire *‘to look like idealized media icons [that] may result in negative body image when those bodily ideals are not attained’* (p. 58). Research indicates a strong link between intense personal celebrity-worship, preoccupation with body shape and body dissatisfaction.

In the *National Survey of Young Australians 2010*, body image was rated the most important area of personal concern for young people, with 32% of over 50,000 respondents identifying it as a major concern for them. The next most common concerns were family conflict and coping with stress. Body image was the top concern for both genders, but girls rated it as a slightly higher concern than boys in the survey.

The Australian Government’s 2009 *A Proposed National Strategy on Body Image* identifies measures which the Government could undertake to support the development of positive body image. These measures include:

- ⌘ voluntary industry **code of conduct** on body image;
- ⌘ **standardised sizing** in the clothes industry;
- ⌘ public advocacy, including the use of a **positive body image checklist in schools**;
- ⌘ examining the **school curriculum** with reference to body image.

Other areas of focus include third-level education, families, an online strategy, workplaces and community organisations. This broad focus reflects the many ways in which body image can be influenced and shaped.

In relation to young people’s body image, the Strategy’s *Checklist for Body Image Friendly Schools* produced by the Australian Government includes:

- ⌘ body image-friendly **school and sport uniforms**, designed in consultation with students;
- ⌘ ensuring students are **not weighed or measured** in any school context;
- ⌘ providing **balanced food options** to students;
- ⌘ **posters** that display a variety of body shapes, sizes and ethnicities;
- ⌘ **training for staff and teachers** in relation to body image;
- ⌘ providing relevant **information to parents**.

The central role of gender

Research shows that gender is one of the most significant factors in determining body image satisfaction. Probably the most important differences between male and female body image is that girls and young women tend to want to change their weight and to be thinner than they are, whereas boys and young men are most likely to feel dissatisfied with their muscle size, particularly around their abdomen, chest and upper arms. Research indicates a strong link between negative body image among young women and their exposure to thin-body ideals in the media. There is also a good case to be made for arguing that negative body image is as high among males, but that it is less socially acceptable for boys and men to admit to such concerns. A raft of research on young males suggests that this can often be the case.

In an early Canadian study of 277 young male and female college students, Muth and Cash (1997) found that compared to men, women had more negative body-image evaluations, stronger investments in their looks and more frequent negative body-image related emotions.

Hintikka *et al* (2000) found among the 40 teenage boys they studied in Finland that half reported the media had no effect on them, contrary to findings from research with girls. Many boys said that media images and social comparison actually improved their body image. This study found that parents played a highly significant role in altering attitudes and behaviours in relation to boys' attempts to influence their weight, shape and size, with mothers having a positive role in relation to eating habits and fathers having more of an influence on the amount of exercise taken.

Grogan and Richards (2002) found in their study of men and boys in England that adolescent males tended to relate body shape ideas to fitness and sports. These men and boys stigmatised fat as signifying lack of control and weakness, blaming and ridiculing those who were perceived as overweight and even accepting the legitimacy of being bullied themselves if they were fat. Male social power and self-confidence were closely linked to the appearance rather than the function of the body, where the right 'look' was seen to be more important than having a healthy or strong body.

Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2006) conducted a survey of teenage boys in Toronto, Canada, to find out more about how they talked about their body image. The participants (aged 14-16 years) said that they were on the whole satisfied with their appearance and did not feel influenced by media images. However, some said that physical appearance was more important to them than they would usually admit to and also that they do not talk about body image because it is a 'feminine or gay issue'.

Goodwin *et al* (2011) in the UK found that media influences played an important role in fostering a desire to be thin, both among boys and girls, and could contribute to an environment where compulsive exercising would result. They also found a correlation between messages to be more muscular from significant others, particularly fathers, and compulsive exercise among boys.

Research shows that the use of the body-building supplement anabolic-androgenic steroid is on the increase in male adolescents in the UK (ACMD, 2011; Travis, 2010), although a recent study suggests its use may now be levelling off in the USA (Johnston *et al*, 2011). Anabolic-androgenic steroids have a number of physiological effects, most notably growth of skeletal muscle and

bone, and effects on the reproductive system and sexual characteristics of males, and there is evidence that the use of these substances can cause both physical and psychological harm to the user (ACMD, 2011).

Females who engage in sports and exercise face a number of dilemmas. Barber and Krane (2006) discuss the pressure to be perceived as feminine (and heterosexual) among female athletes and the issues that this raises in terms of controlling their body size and shape.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2009)⁴, smoking among young women has increased in recent years worldwide and, especially in cultures where women are subjected to unrealistic body-image ideals, girls and young women may take up or continue smoking because of their mistaken belief that smoking helps weight loss. In fact, the WHO asserts that cigarette smoking is not associated with a lower BMI (body mass index) in young women.

Diedrichs *et al* (2011), in relation to media images, found that most young people they surveyed in Australia were dissatisfied with the restricted range of body types, male and female, and the objectification of women in the media, and would welcome average-sized models. However, there were some concerns about '*promoting obesity*' (p. 263) and also about the difficulties of persuading advertisers to use '*normal looking people*' (p. 264) to sell products, when they felt that most marketing strategies in fact rely on making people feel bad about the way they look and then offering them a product that can change that.

In summary, studies since the 1990s have indicated an increasingly complex picture of the context, causes and consequences of negative body image among young people worldwide. There are notable differences between young females and young males in every study, and in Irish research to date, these patterns appear to be repeated.

Research in the Irish context

The population of young people (up to 19 years) in the Republic of Ireland is 1,154,706, representing 27% of the population, which is higher than the European average (see www.cso.ie for further information on Census 2011). For example, in Denmark, Germany and Italy, young people account for less than 18% of the population.

There has been very little research in an Irish context on the issue of body image among young people, which is one of the main reasons that the Dáil na nÓg delegates sought to design this survey. The National Longitudinal Study of Children, *Growing Up in Ireland*, which is following the lives of almost 20,000 children, includes questions on body image, but currently the results are only available for the 9-year-old cohort. The *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) Survey poses questions relating to diet, physical activity, weight, height and self-rated health and happiness, but it does not directly address body image. However, results from the 2010 HBSC survey show that 'body image' was ranked 8th in the Top 12 'most interesting' topics that children and young people want to know about; it was prioritised by 9 of the 19 groups in 5 schools (Doyle *et al*, 2010).

⁴ See www.afro.who.int/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_download&gid=2403

A report by De Róiste and Dinneen (2005), commissioned by the National Children's Office, researched the opportunities and barriers to young people's leisure and recreation, and looked at participation in sport and leisure activities among those surveyed. Young people were asked directly if they were happy with the way they looked. Findings showed that 65% answered positively, although stark gender differences were apparent, with three-quarters of boys, but only half of girls being happy with the way they looked. This survey did not go further to examine more closely the determinants of young people's body image, but it did provide some useful information about activity levels and motivation to engage in sports among young people. A marked decline was observed in participation in sports and leisure activities throughout the teenage years. It was found that girls exercised less and preferred more passive pastimes (such as reading and shopping) than boys, who favoured sports, especially team sports. The authors recommended further research into *'body image, self-concept and self-esteem and their relationship to leisure participation'* (p. 156).

The North Western Health Board (2004) conducted research with adolescent girls to determine what influenced their activity levels. Findings showed that although the girls were aware of the importance of exercise for fitness and weight control, both of which were deemed desirable, they pointed to the dilemma facing those who already felt bad about their bodies (because they felt they were overweight) and did not want to display them, as would be necessary if taking part in sports.

Impacts on body image

A small-scale, but in-depth study by McSharry (2009a and 2009b) of 30 Irish adolescents and their views on the body provides a range of interesting insights into body image in an Irish context. Some of the factors found to impact on body image are summarised below.

Media impact on body image

Similar to the findings by Swami *et al* (2011) mentioned above, the teenagers in McSharry's study identified the importance of the media and press in shaping their views of what body shape and size they should strive for in their own lives. As the author states (McSharry, 2009a, p. 127): *'Beautiful, fulfilled, assured celebrity bodies dominate popular press. Many of the girls talked about celebrities adoringly and with longing, while boys talked about their physical qualities and successfulness.'*

The teenagers in McSharry's study were aware of the role of airbrushing in the media images they were subjected to and how unrealistic these projections of the body were for most people, indicating that they were *'not passive victims of the images they received'* (*ibid*, p. 128). Although the media has an important impact on teenagers' views of body image in Ireland and only certain types of bodies are validated by the media, McSharry's study highlights the fact that the teenagers in her research identified the media as only one influence, which was outweighed by the importance of peers.

Impact of peers

Peers were identified by McSharry as the most important influence on body validation for the teenagers in her study. Girls continuously talked about body image and body-image concerns, and were more likely to discuss the bodies of others in their peer group. Boys, on the other hand,

were less likely to openly discuss body image because of a fear of homophobic rejection by their peers since such talk might be perceived as *'gay or girly'* (*ibid*, p. 129).

Although boys did not openly discuss body type with their peers, McSharry cautions that this does not mean they were not equally concerned with issues relating to the ideal body type, particularly through the medium of sport (*see below*). Both genders identified the emotional and physical abuse that was often experienced by those who did not fit the ideal body image, particularly teenagers who were deemed overweight or underweight by their peers.

McSharry also points out that while anti-bullying policies in schools strongly stigmatised bullying on the grounds of race, colour, identity and ability, there was less of an emphasis on body size, which often left teenagers vulnerable to bullying based on body size because they felt the schools might not take their complaints seriously.

Impact of sport

In McSharry's study, the boys referenced particular body types which were identified with various types of sports, such as broad shoulders related to rugby in those schools where the game was popular. However, this often depended on the context of sports played in their schools rather than being universally idealised body images.

'You're more likely to listen to friends than parents.'
Dáil na nÓg Delegate, 2010

Impact of schools and curriculum

McSharry found that teenagers often received confusing messages from their schools. Schools are the sites where young people receive a great deal of input and information about their bodies and body-image expectations from their peers, while the official school curriculum, SPHE, appears to omit the social, psychological and emotional aspects of body image. SPHE emphasizes health and well-being as being associated with the physically fit body type, but in reality schools frequently fail to provide students with healthy food and snack options.

McSharry also points out that among teachers who are involved in teaching subjects that relate to understanding the body, some feel they do not have enough training for this topic and the lessons tend to focus on obesity, health lifestyle choices and asking their students to *'think more about their bodies'* (*ibid*, p. 134), while in reality the teenagers may already be too focused on thinking about body image and need support and information about how to cope with the issues that this raises.

Impact of parents and family

Previous research with young people in Ireland suggests that parents play an important role in providing social and psychological support for their adolescent children (De Róiste and Dinneen, 2005; Dolan, 2005). Teenagers in McSharry's study were very aware of their parents' own fitness regimes and attitude to body image, and many of the teenagers participated in fitness routines with their parents. McSharry notes that some of the Transition Year students had joined gyms and some of the younger students had created 'mini-gyms' in their bedrooms. Rather than simply applauding these developments as indicating a healthy interest in taking exercise, McSharry cautions against the individualised nature of these types of activities, which can often work to overly focus the young person on their own bodies rather than on enjoying the activity itself, as she suggests might be more the case in team sports (McSharry, 2009b, p. 4).

It was clear that many of the young people had adopted their parents' own 'sizist' approach to the body. These parents often made critical remarks about excess flesh on their own bodies, and those of their children and strangers, and their attitudes were reflected in the young people's criticisms of themselves and others along these same lines (McSharry, 2009a, p. 132).

McSharry (2009a and 2009b) recommends that the formal schools curriculum should address body image directly, rather than focusing exclusively on its physical components, such as diet, obesity and healthy lifestyle. She stresses that it is the sociological factors that influence the self-perceptions of children and young people, and the stigmatisation of bodies that do not conform to an ideal, that require urgent attention in the educational system.

Summary

Body image is a genuine concern for young people and negative body image has serious physical, psychological and social consequences. These consequences include depression, impaired interpersonal relationships, eating disorders, excessive exercise, use of artificial enhancers and dieting supplements, being the subject of bullying, self-harm, plastic surgery and smoking.

The literature shows a number of factors that influence young people's body image, foremost of which are peers and families, popular ideals of masculinity and femininity, media/celebrity culture, schools and involvement in sports. In all studies, while age differences are largely overlooked, gender proves to be a consistently critical variable in influencing young people's body image.

As suggested by McSharry (2009a and 2009b) and as the case of Australia demonstrates, where a national strategy to improve body image is implemented, particularly where it is adopted on a large scale, negative body image among young people can be significantly reduced.

4. Findings from the survey

The Dáil na nÓg Body Image Survey was a fully anonymous questionnaire which set out to discover the things that affect young people's body image. The survey aimed to produce evidence for developing an approach to promoting healthy body image among young people in Ireland. More than 2,000 young people from all backgrounds, from every county in Ireland, took part in the survey, which was administered by Dáil Council members at all 34 Comhairle na nÓg AGMs in November 2011.

The main findings of the survey are outlined below, question by question. Where relevant, age and gender breakdowns, and cross-referencing between questions, provide deeper insights into the data.

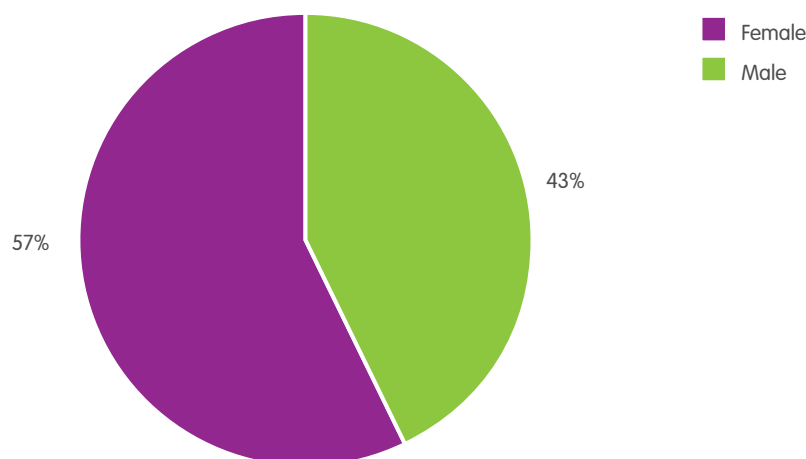
Age

In total, **2,156 young people** between the ages of 10-21 took part in the Body Image Survey. The age breakdown of participants shows a high concentration of young people **aged 15-16 (51.3%)**, while **30.5% were aged 12-14** and a further **15.2% were aged 17-18**. Less than 3% of those who took part were outside of these age groups, so findings broadly reflect the official age profile of Comhairle na nÓg (12-18 years).

Gender

Almost **three-fifths (57%)** of the participants were **female**, while just over **two-fifths (43%)** were **male** (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Breakdown of participants, by gender

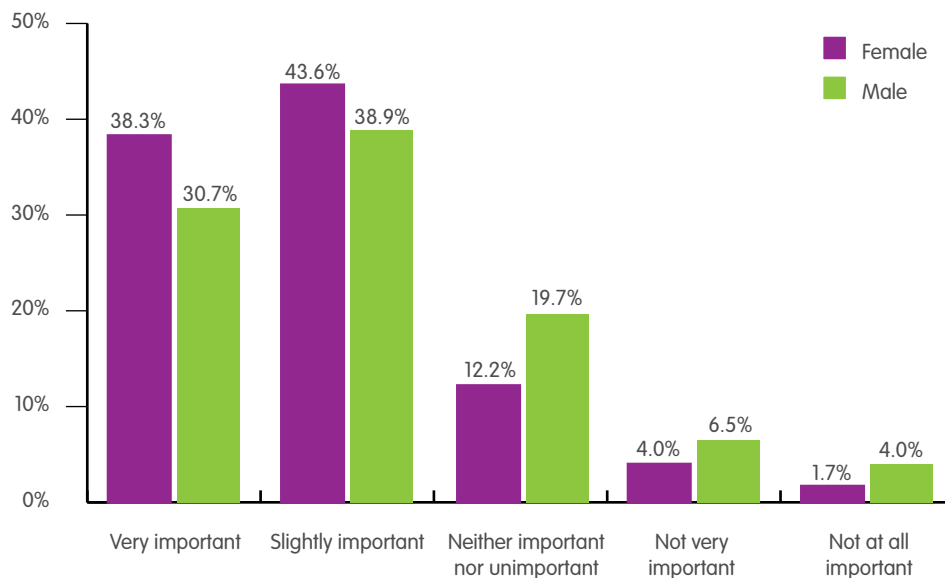


Girls outnumbered boys at every age, being most pronounced at 15 years, where **girls** accounted for 64% and **boys** for 36% of those who participated in the survey.

Importance of body image

When asked *How important is your body image?*, significantly more female participants than males ranked body image as important, with more than **82% of girls ranking it as either slightly or very important, compared to 70% of boys**. Although most participants (77%) stated that body image was important, **almost twice as many boys as girls** said that body image was **not important** to them (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Importance of body image, by gender

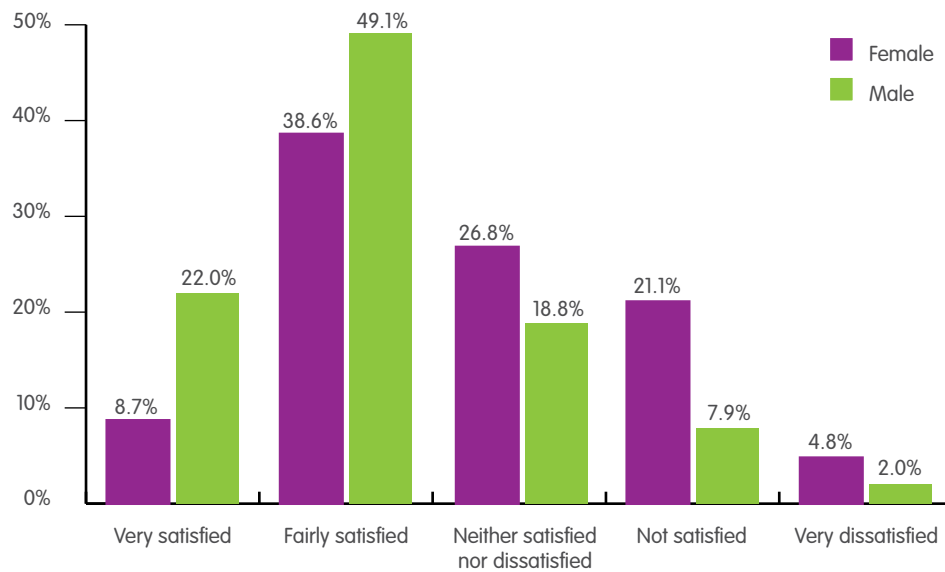


Satisfaction with body image

When asked *Are you satisfied with your body image?*, overall **57% of participants expressed some level of satisfaction**. But, again, as with importance of body image (*above*), there were striking differences between males and females in the levels of satisfaction shown (see Figure 3). More than **twice as many boys as girls** were either **very satisfied** (22% male; 8% female) or **fairly satisfied** (49% male; 37% female) with their body image, while more than **two and a half times more girls than boys** expressed **dissatisfaction** with their body image (26% female; 10% male). These results strongly indicate that male respondents are more confident about their body image than females in this survey.

'I feel people stare at me. I feel there's something wrong with me.'

14-year-old girl

Figure 3: Level of satisfaction with body image, by gender

There were **higher levels of satisfaction** with body image among **younger** participants. **Three-quarters** (75%) of **12-year-olds** expressed **satisfaction** (being fairly or very satisfied) with their body image, compared with **just over half** (53%) of **15-year-olds**. All other age groups showed significantly lower levels of satisfaction with their body image. Far more **12-year-olds** (29%) and **18-year-olds** (28%) said they were **very satisfied** with their body image, compared with **15-year-olds** (11%), who were the age group **least satisfied** with their body image.

Influences on body image

When asked *How do things such as eating habits, activity levels, family, celebrities, etc. influence your body image?*, **positive impacts** were rated as **activity** (74%), **sports** (69%), **confidence** and **friends** (64% each), and **family** (62%).

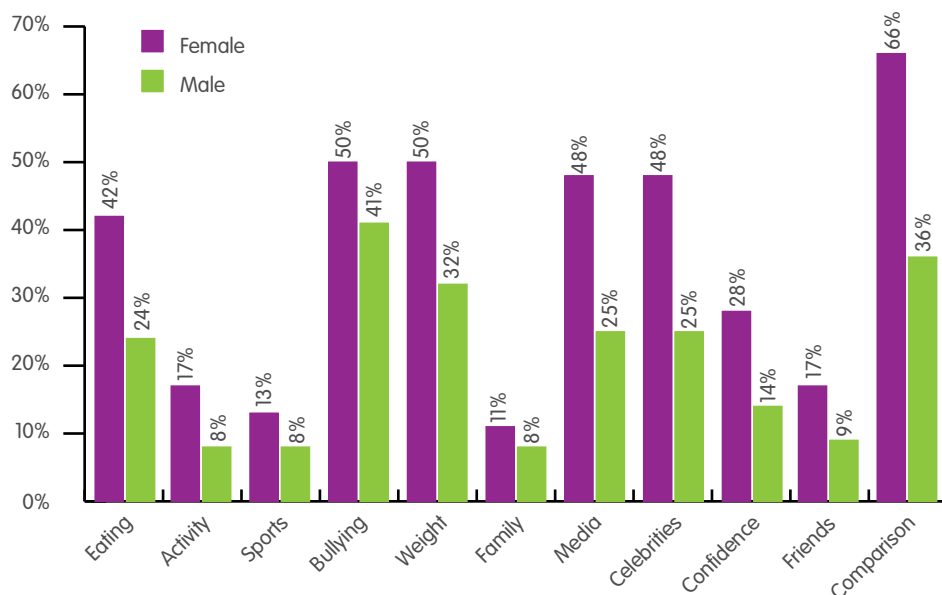
The most significant **negative impact** was found to be **comparing** oneself with others (53%), followed closely by **bullying** (46%), **weight** (42%), **media** (39%) and **celebrities** (38%).

Here again, some significant gender differences emerged. **Girls** (66%) were most negatively influenced by **comparing** themselves with others, while **boys** (41%) were most negatively influenced by **bullying**. Fewer **girls** said that any of the influences listed had a **positive effect on their body image**. As Figure 4 shows, in most cases, up to **twice as many girls as boys** said that they were **negatively affected** by these influences.

'I can fix some of the things when I'm 18. Family are a good influence, but they can't fix everything, even if they try. But support is nice.'

16-year-old girl

Figure 4: Negative effects on body image, by gender

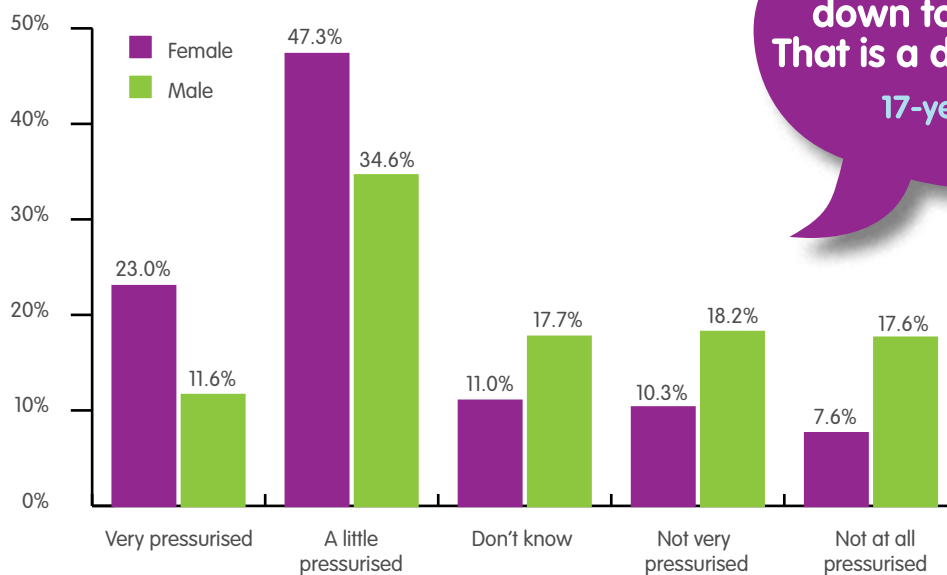


One male participant also noted the role of '*medication and sickness*' as impacting on his body image. Another boy said '*how I look*' affected his body image, while yet another boy said that '*money and clothes*' influenced his body image.

Pressure to look good for other people

When asked *Do you feel pressurised to look good?*, **60%** of all participants said that they did **feel pressurised** to look good for other people. Far more **girls** (70%) than boys (46%) said this, whereas twice as many **boys** (36%) as girls (18%) reported **not feeling much, if any, pressure** to look good for others (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Feeling pressurised to look good, by gender



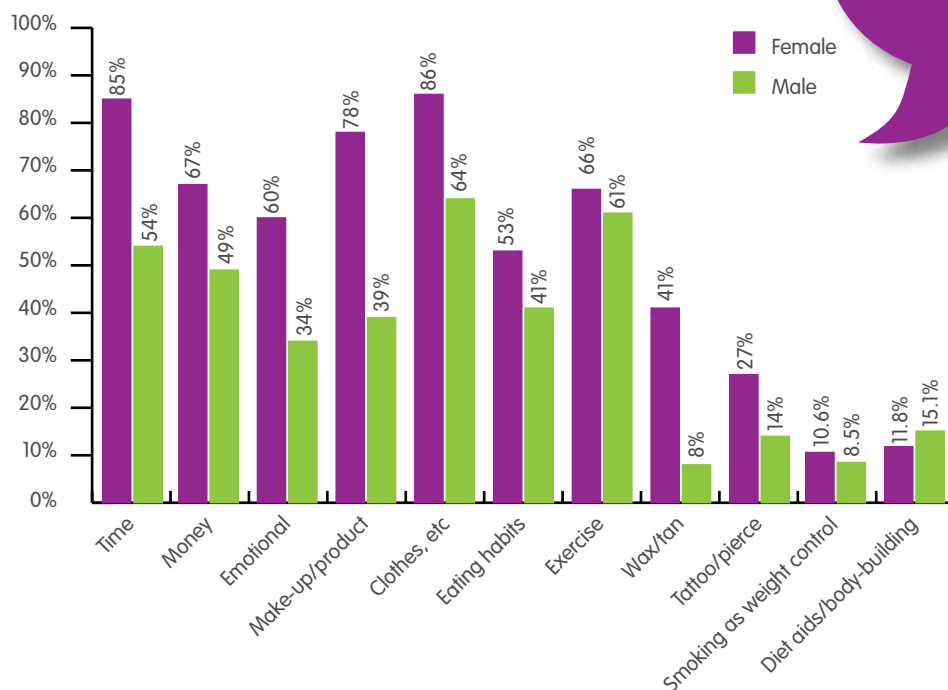
'It ultimately comes down to confidence. That is a deciding factor.'
17-year-old boy

Putting effort into appearance

When asked *How much effort do you put into your appearance?*, with things like time, money, eating habits, exercise, dieting and body-building aids, most participants said that they put a **good deal of effort** into such things as **clothes** (77%), **time** (70%), **exercise** (64%) and **money** (59%).

Again, some notable gender differences emerged, as shown in Figure 6. Similar to other findings, in all but two of the categories in the questionnaire, **significantly more girls than boys put a lot of effort into their appearance**. **Four out of 5 girls** (85%) **put time** into their appearance compared with **just over half of boys** (54%), and almost **two-thirds of girls** (60%) said that they put a lot or some **emotional effort** into their appearance (such as planning, worrying, thinking about) as opposed to just **one-third of boys** (34%). **More girls** (11%) than boys (8%) **smoke as weight control** and **more than half of girls** (53%) compared with only **2 in 5 boys** (41%) put some or a lot of **effort into their eating habits**. The two categories where **boys put in similar or more effort** to girls were **exercise** (61% male; 66% female) and **taking diet and body-building supplements** (15% male; 12% female).

Figure 6: Amount of effort put into appearance, by gender

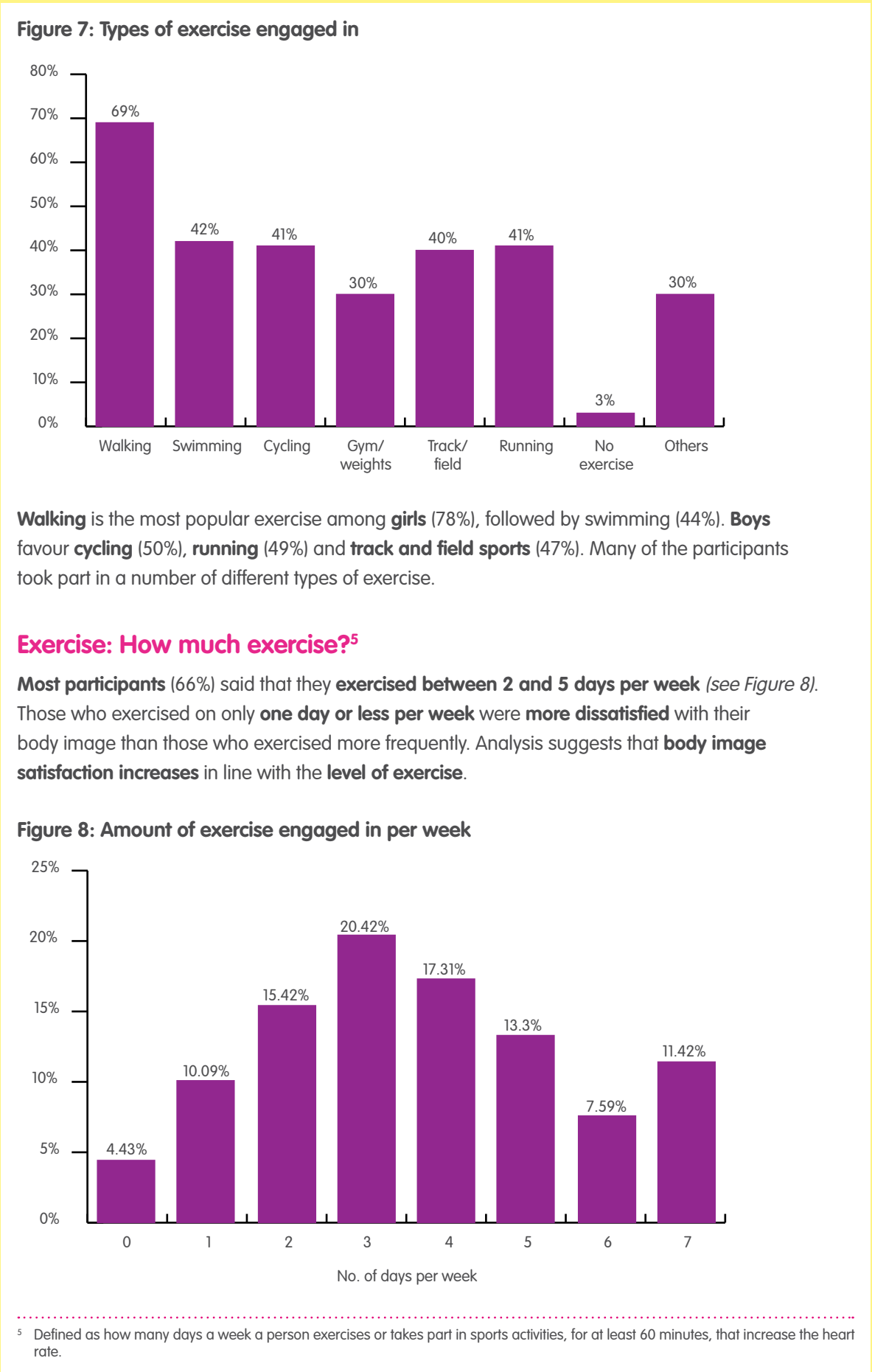


'I try to appear like I have a high body image, but I hate my body.'

16-year-old girl

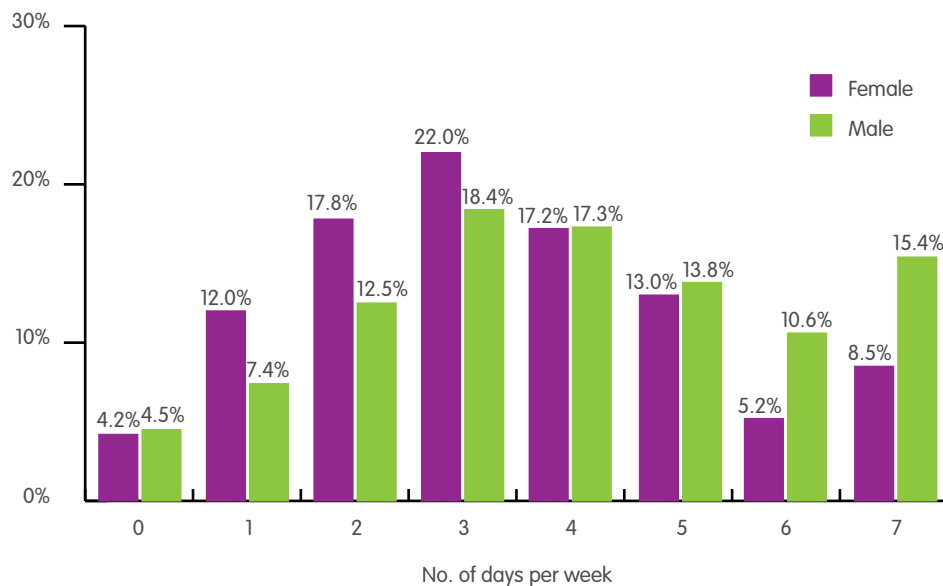
Exercise: What type of exercise?

As Figure 7 shows, **most participants** (97%) did **some type of exercise**, the most common activities being **walking** (69%) followed by swimming (42%), cycling (41%), running (41%), track and field (40%), with almost **a third** of all participants doing **gym/weights** (30%). Far more **boys** (39%) than girls (24%) **took part in gym/weights**. Other types of exercise included dance, basketball, martial arts, tennis and badminton, boxing, golf, horse-riding, water sports and Parkour (jumping from object to object).



Again, gender differences emerged in this area (see Figure 9). On average, **girls exercised on 3 or fewer days** per week, whereas **boys exercised on 4 or more days** per week. **Boys** (15%) outnumbered **girls** (8%) by almost 2 to 1 among those who **exercised 7 days** per week, while the sexes are equal among those who never take this level of exercise.

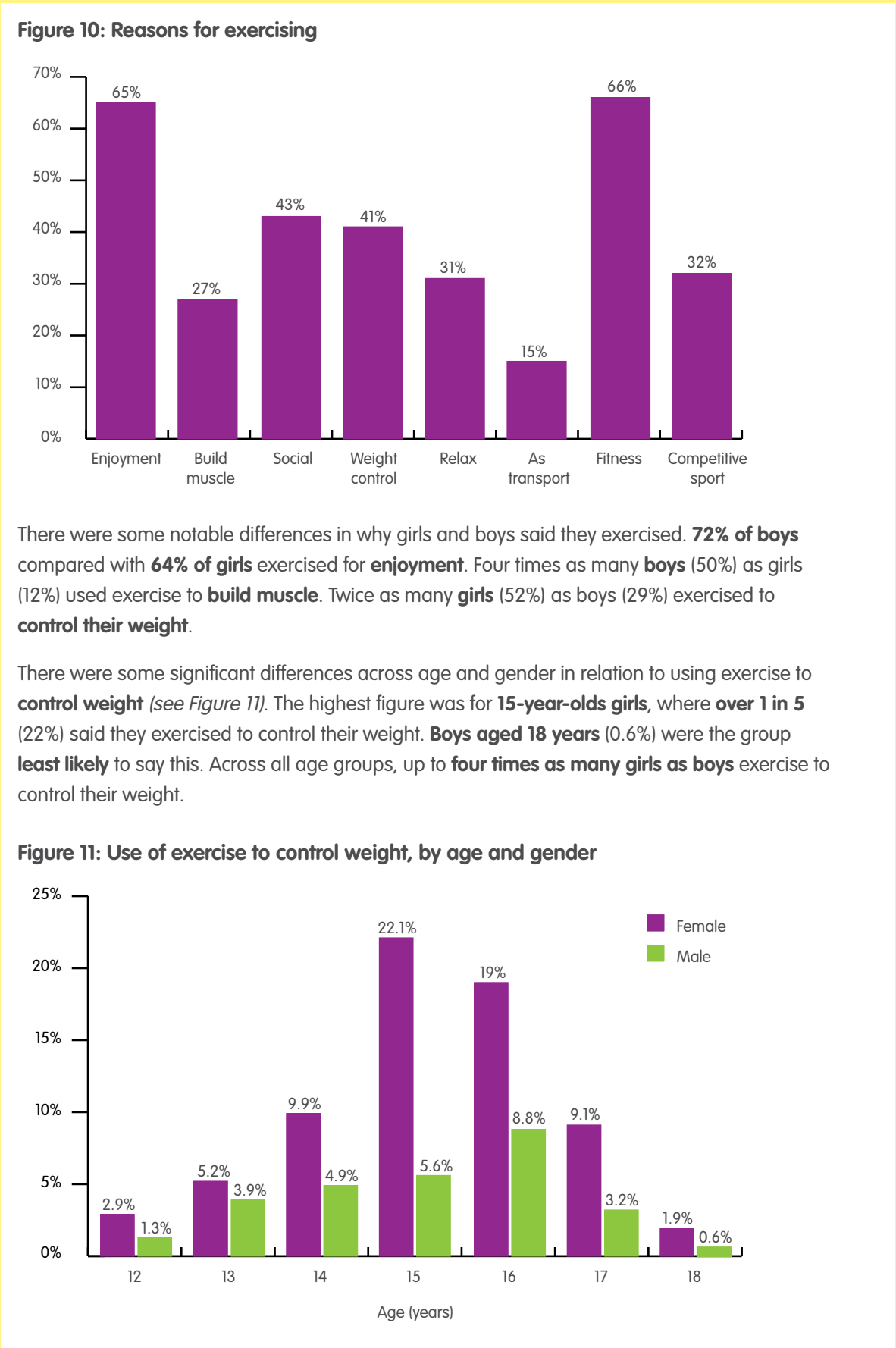
Figure 9: Amount of exercise engaged in per week, by gender



Age also appeared to influence the amount of exercise young people took, with rates of exercise generally decreasing with age. Most age groups averaged 3 or 4 days' exercise a week, but at the ends of the scale, only **5% of 12-year-olds exercised one day or less** per week, compared with **30% of 18-year-olds**, while **15- and 16-year-olds** were **least likely** to exercise **7 days** a week.

Exercise: Reasons for exercising?

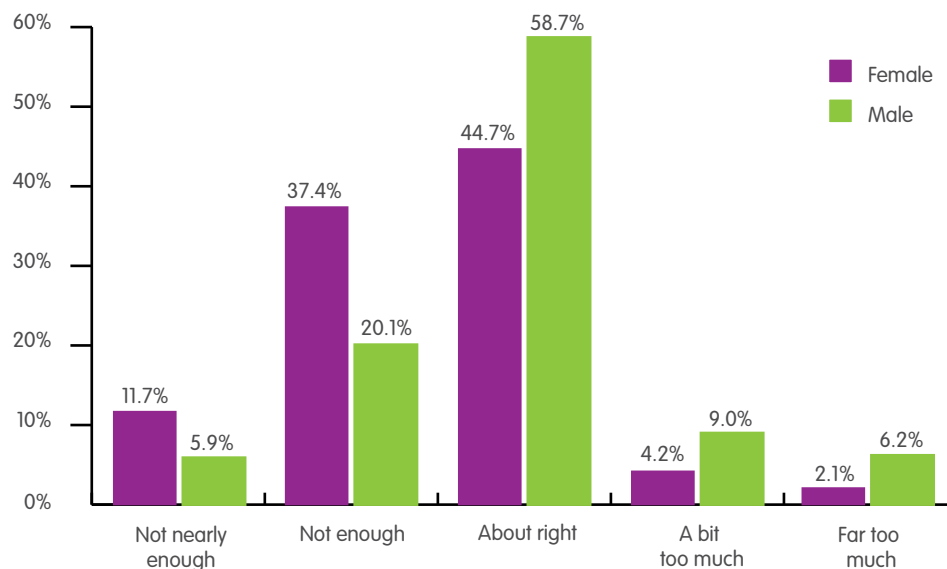
The reasons that young people exercise were found to vary considerably (see Figure 10). Most participants said that they **exercised to keep fit** (66%), or for **enjoyment** (65%). One 15-year-old girl said she exercised because of pressure from her family. Although **walking and cycling** were among the **Top 3 most popular** forms of exercise, only **15% used exercise as a form of transport**.



Exercise and health

When asked *Do you exercise enough for your health?*, **twice as many girls** (49%) as boys (26%) **felt that they do not take enough exercise to stay healthy** (see Figure 12). Interestingly, while more **boys** (59%) than girls (45%) said they take **about the right amount of exercise**, more **boys** (15%) than girls (6%) felt that they take **more exercise than is healthy**. There is a slight correlation between those who go to the gym or lift weights, and those who feel that they overexercise and that this has a negative impact on their health.

Figure 12: Amount of exercise engaged in to stay healthy, by gender

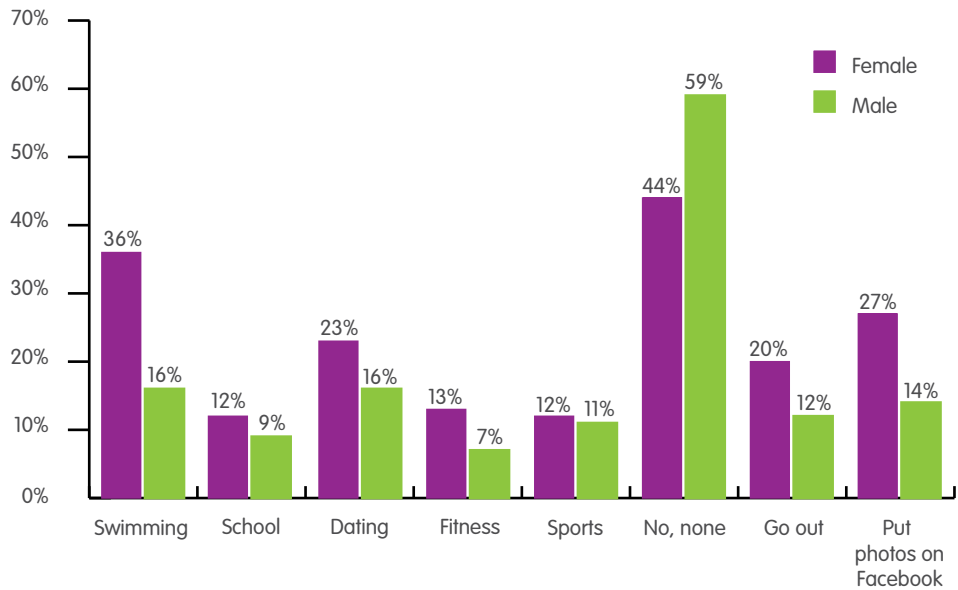


Body image and participation in activities

Participants were asked to outline how their body image affects their participation in various activities, such as swimming, sports and dating. When asked *Does your body image make it harder to take part in a range of activities?*, **50%** of participants said **No**, their body image does not make it harder to participate in these activities.

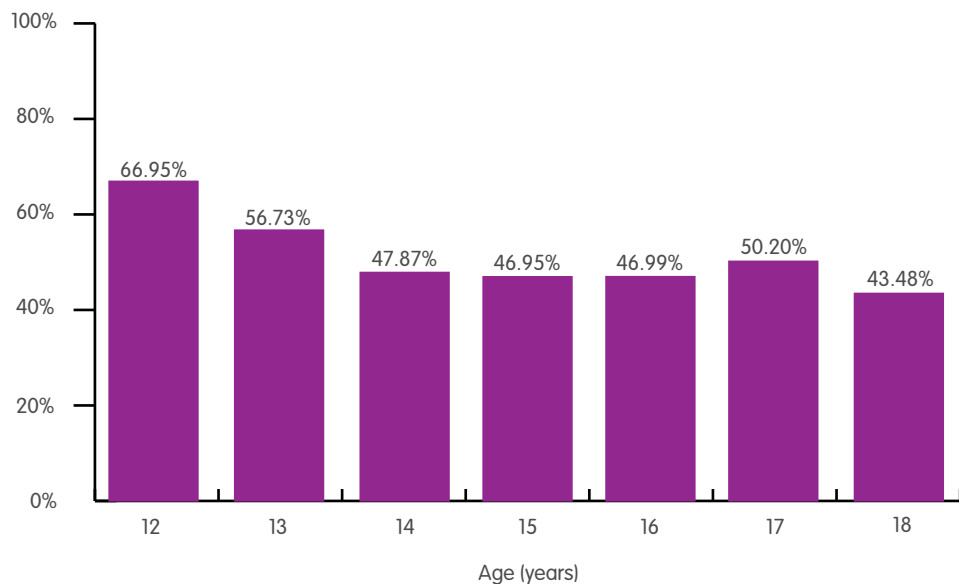
However, some gender differences must be noted. The **majority of boys** answered **No** (59%), compared with **less than half** (44%) of **girls**. **Girls** outnumbered **boys** by as much as **2 to 1** in finding it harder to take part in **all activities** (see Figure 13). Both **girls** (36%) and **boys** (16%) were most likely to say that their body image makes it harder to take part in **swimming**, followed by **putting photographs on Facebook** (27% female; 14% male) and **dating** (23% female; 16% male).

Figure 13: Effect of body image on participation in activities, by gender



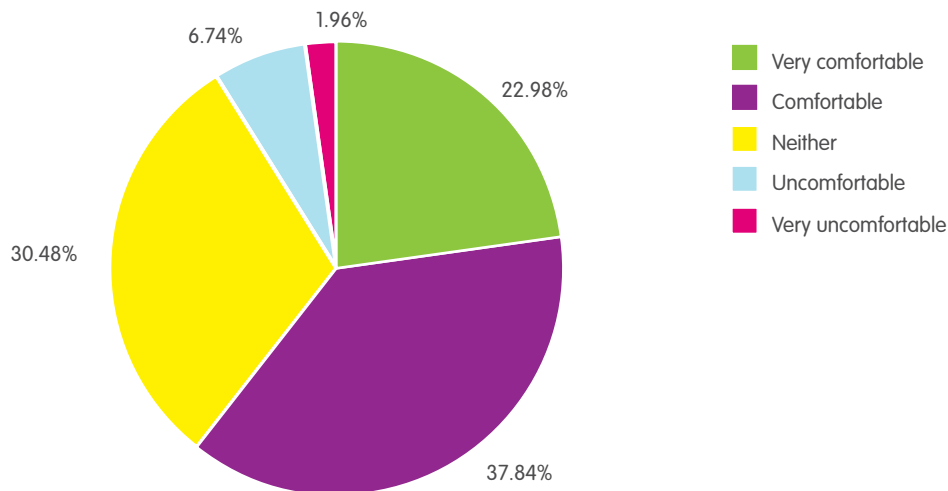
As with other questions, more **younger participants** said that their **body image does not affect their participation** in activities (see Figure 14). **Two-thirds (67%) of 12-year-olds** stated that their body image **does not affect** their participation in these activities, after which there is a fairly stable decrease with age, with just **44% of 18-year-olds** reporting that body image has **no effect** on what they do.

Figure 14: No activities affected by body image, by age

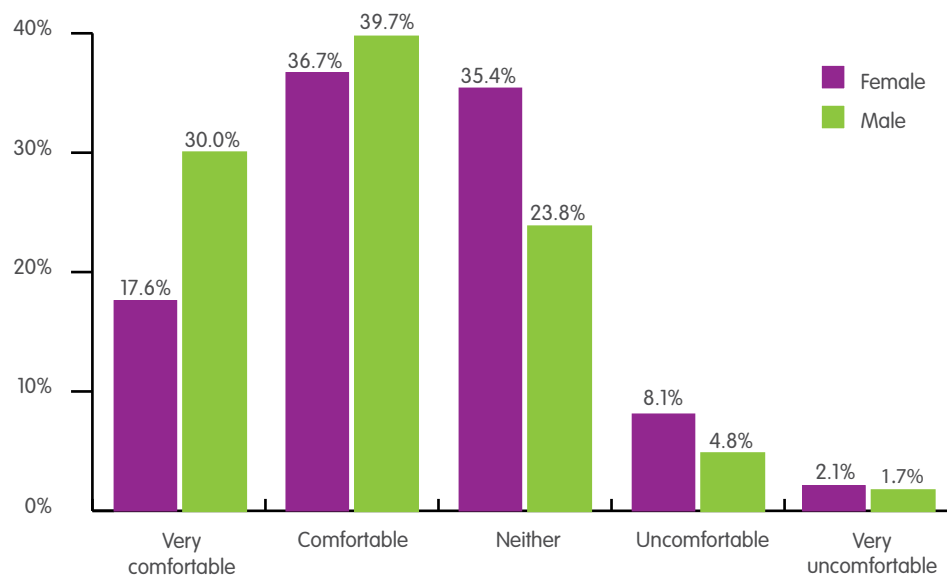


Level of 'comfort' in completing questionnaire

When asked *How do you feel completing this questionnaire?*, **most** participants (61%) said that they **felt comfortable** doing so (see Figure 15). However, 30% felt neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, while **9% felt some degree of discomfort**.

Figure 15: Level of 'comfort' in completing Body Image questionnaire

Significantly more boys (70%) than girls (54%) said they **felt comfortable** completing the questionnaire (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Level of 'comfort' in completing Body Image questionnaire, by gender

Recommendations by young people to raise awareness

Members of the Dáil na nÓg Council who were working on the research report were particularly concerned that it should focus on young people's views and ideas about how to promote awareness of the importance of a healthy body image. The young people who completed the survey made a range of creative and innovative suggestions for raising awareness about the importance of healthy body image. These included a number of gender- and age-appropriate interventions and supports available to young people throughout the teenage years in schools and in other youth

"YouTube video – modern, try not to be too boring, not too organisation like."

16-year-old girl

settings, such as youth clubs and sports centres, to address the complex issues that face adolescents and that impact on their confidence, physical and mental health, and lifestyles. These recommendations can be broadly grouped under four approaches, in order of the frequency with which they were suggested.

'Discussing the importance of good mental health in school and offering free services to help people who struggle with mental health.'

17-year-old girl

Awareness-raising campaigns

The most popular approach is the use of awareness-raising campaigns, including suggestions about having celebrities get involved in raising awareness; highlighting instances of altered photographs and showing the 'before and after' images; using more 'normal' models; schools having an awareness week/day; and 'Be Yourself' campaigns.

It was suggested that these campaigns to promote awareness should use television, posters, pamphlets, social networks, the Internet and other media that young people routinely access.

Personal Development measures

The second most popular suggestion related to Personal Development programmes and education as ways to develop young people's confidence and help them to enhance their overall well-being, as well as providing sources of support for those experiencing difficulties. These suggestions imply that young people perceive poor body image as being a problem related to self-esteem rather than purely to outside influences (such as celebrities), poor lifestyle choices, diet, physical fitness or appearance.

Information

'Maybe a group of people who are suffering from bullying get an opportunity to tell their story and meet every now and again. Because they understand each other.'

14-year-old girl

The third most popular approach is to make more information available and accessible to young people. This could cover issues such as healthy lifestyle and diet, harm associated with eating disorders and the use of dieting aids and body-building supplements. The use of posters displayed in schools and other youth settings, social media and television were all suggested as ways of disseminating such information.

A significant number of responses highlighted the role of schools in imparting such information. It was strongly suggested that schools need to incorporate 'body image' into the mainstream SPHE curriculum for all years and, where necessary, to bring in outside experts to talk to students on the subject, as well as people who had themselves gone through, perhaps, eating disorders or bullying related to body image.

'A schools initiative where they promote healthy = happy and sports that kids do for enjoyment rather than weight loss. If they enjoy the sports, then they will do them more and be more healthy.'

14-year-old boy

Promoting sports and exercise

Sports and exercise were suggested as ways of enhancing body image and also as a way of raising awareness about the importance of having a healthy body image, for example, by teaching the theory of PE in schools and by having sports celebrities talk publicly about the issues. Some participants argued that focusing on raising awareness might not produce lasting results, whereas focusing on exercise as actually *enjoyable* could be a better approach. A number of suggestions criticised the school PE curriculum for being too traditional, too narrow and too male-oriented; it was felt that schools should promote sports that are enjoyable and varied, and attractive to girls, including cycling, golf and new dance forms. One male participant stated that although there are sports clubs already in existence, young people who are unhappy with their body will not join, especially if the emphasis is on body-image awareness.

Other suggestions

These included having less focus on obesity, more focus on eating disorders and having a local or national Body Image Day. Many other suggestions focused on the role of schools in educating and supporting young people in developing a positive body image and healthy lifestyle. Ideas included:

- :: 'body image' as a specific, discrete topic in the formal school curriculum (SPHE), focusing on personal development rather than physical health or body size and shape;
- :: talks from people who themselves have experienced such things as eating disorders or bullying;
- :: posters with information for students on lifestyle and diet, harm associated with eating disorders and the use of dieting aids and body-building supplements;
- :: including body image-related bullying in schools' anti-bullying strategies;
- :: support groups for those dealing with body image-related problems, such as eating disorders or bullying;
- :: healthy food in canteens and vending machines;
- :: physical education (PE) that makes exercise fun and varied, so there is '*something for everyone*' and special attention focused on engaging girls in enjoyable physical activity throughout the adolescent years.

'Instead of pointing out flaws in an "unhealthy" body image, they should try to make people comfortable with their own image.'

16-year-old boy

One young person suggested that people should have the right to '*grow in an environment where positive body image is promoted*' and suggested that this right should be inserted into the wording of the forthcoming Referendum on Children's Rights.

Summary

The most common suggestions for raising awareness of a healthy body image thus centre around awareness-raising campaigns, and while some of these suggestions focus on promoting self-esteem, the majority relate to raising awareness of the role of enhanced images, celebrity culture and unrealistically thin models. Other suggestions, which may perhaps have been focusing more on the 'healthy' rather than the 'body image' aspect of the questions, centre on providing health information and on promoting sports.

Raising awareness – A model of good practice

In terms of looking at good practice for public information campaigns aimed at young people, the teen mental health television advertisement, popularly known as 'the boy in the hoodie', presents a highly successful model (*you can see the ad on www.letsomeoneknow.ie/home/video/*).

This HSE advertisement grew out of a number of parallel processes on teenage mental health being overseen by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA), the Office for Disability and Mental Health, the Health Service Executive (HSE) and its National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP).

Both Dáil na nÓg 2008 and the mental health consultations conducted with teenagers by the OMCYA in 2008 highlighted the need for a positive mental health public awareness campaign aimed specifically at teenagers. Following the launch of the report of the consultations, *Teenage Mental Health: What Helps and What Hurts?* (OMCYA, 2009), concepts for a HSE TV advertisement and awareness campaign on teenage mental health were focus-tested in several forums of young people around the country. A reference panel of 25 young people was established by the OMCYA and NOSP to become involved in the development of the awareness campaign at every stage of the process. Members of the reference panel gave feedback on creative concepts and messages throughout the process of developing the TV and cinema ads and the online campaign. They advised on everything, from the ideal accent for the main character in the ad, to the most appropriate clothes for the actors, to appealing to the widest possible audience of teenagers. They also advised on the TV time slots for screening the ad in order to ensure viewing by a maximum number of teenagers.

The ad features a teenage boy with a hoodie who cannot share his feelings with anyone. Young people from the reference panel featured as extras in the ad.

Quantitative research conducted on behalf of the HSE with 505 young people found that the TV/cinema ad had an exceptionally high level of recall and awareness among teenagers – at 87%. (A recall/awareness rate of 49% is the Republic of Ireland norm for TV/cinema advertisements from a cross-section of industries.) The research further indicates that the TV/cinema ad had the following impacts:

- ⌘ motivated 3 in 4 young people to talk to someone if something is getting them down;
- ⌘ encouraged them to find out more about looking after their mental health;
- ⌘ made them think differently about mental health.

The unusually strong impact of the TV/cinema advertising campaign highlights the value of the methodology used in obtaining the views of young people and involving them in every stage of development and delivery of the campaign.

The advertisement received the Taoiseach's Public Service Excellence Award and continues to be screened on a regular basis in cinemas throughout Ireland.

5. Discussion on Findings and Recommendations

Clearly, the findings of the Dáil na nÓg *How we see it: Survey on Young People's Body Image* demonstrate that body image is a burning and complex issue for young people in Ireland. This is confirmed in the review of international and national literature on the subject (see Chapter 3). Although initial impressions might suggest that young people have a relatively high level of satisfaction with their body image – with 2 out of 3 participants saying that they are fairly or very satisfied with their body image – as the questions probe more deeply, some contradictory findings begin to emerge. For example, while a majority of all participants say that they are satisfied with their body image, almost 2 in 3 say they feel pressurised to look good for other people, and more than half say that comparing themselves with others impacts negatively on their body image and that their body image interferes with their participation in certain listed activities, such as swimming. This trend is even more pronounced among girls, who are up to twice as likely as boys to find it harder to take part in all of the listed activities and who were also more likely to report feeling uncomfortable completing the Body Image Survey questionnaire itself.

The range of influences on young people's body image that were investigated by the survey and the effects of body-image satisfaction levels raise a number of issues, which are now discussed more fully. Following this discussion, the suggestions for raising awareness of body image, made by the young people during the course of this research, are presented.

Influences on body image

The most important positive influences on body image identified by those who took part in the survey are activity and sport, followed by confidence, friends and family. Comparison, bullying, weight, media and celebrities are the most important negative influences. Cutting across these findings, age and gender emerge as highly significant factors influencing body image.

Age

It seems that the younger you are, the more satisfied you are with your body image and the less likely body-image problems are to prevent you from taking part in social and leisure activities. Three out of four 12-year-olds express satisfaction with their body image, compared with just one in two 17-year-olds. Only one in twenty 12-year-olds exercise one day or less per week, compared with one in three 18-year-olds. Clearly, the problem with dissatisfaction with body image is hitting hard in the mid-teens. Fourteen seems to be the age at which the most marked decline in body image satisfaction begins to appear, peaking at the age of 15, and participation in a range of activities, including exercise, is also negatively impacted across the adolescent years.

During one of the research training sessions, one of the young people suggested that going through a period of feeling bad about one's body may be a natural, and indeed an essential, part of the maturing process. It is clear from this comment, and from many of the comments made in the returned questionnaires, that young people themselves are aware of the issues and are struggling to explain the problems that they experience in relation to body image.

Gender

Questions about what constitutes the acceptable or ideal body also involve looking at gender identity. How should the male body look and how should the female body look? What are the relationships between fat, muscles and gender? While in this survey, the vast majority of participants state that body image is important, boys are almost twice as likely as girls to say that body image is not important to them and that they do not feel much, if any, pressure to look good for other people. This supports a common '*stereotype, that girls care more than guys about their image*' (Dáil na nÓg Council member), but it may also signify that boys are feeling pressure to uphold a heterosexual, '*macho*' façade that prevents them admitting to concerns about body image for fear of being seen as effeminate or gay, as has been found in other research. Perhaps significantly, bullying was found to be the strongest negative influence on male body image in the survey.

Other gender-related differences emerge in almost every category addressed by the survey.

Body-image satisfaction is lower, and feeling pressured to look good for other people is far higher among girls. Girls state that their body image is most likely to be negatively affected by comparing themselves with others, and they outnumber boys among those who put time and emotional effort into their appearance and eating habits, and into most of the other given categories. They are more likely than boys to smoke to control their weight, and across the age groups they are up to four times as likely as boys to exercise for weight control – even at the age of 12, they are more than twice as likely as boys to do this.

'Most teens know all this info – we accept it is an issue.'

17-year-old girl

Exercise and supplements

Almost all of the young people who took part in the survey engage in some type of exercise and, in a positive finding regarding young people and exercise in Ireland, most participants say that they exercise between 2 and 5 days per week. But again, age and gender appear to influence the exercise young people take, with rates of exercise generally decreasing with age and girls taking less exercise than boys. Girls are more likely to walk or to swim, which activities primarily burn calories, while boys, who take up to twice as much exercise as girls, are more likely to take part in vigorous activities, such as cycling, running or track and field sports, which build muscle.

There appears to be a close positive correlation between body-image satisfaction and frequency of exercise. Perhaps this goes some way towards explaining gender differences in body-image satisfaction. Boys exercise frequently and they exercise for enjoyment. Girls are not as active overall as boys and are less likely to cite enjoyment as a reason for exercising. Perhaps related to this, 1 in 2 girls say they do not take enough exercise to stay healthy, while the majority of boys say they take the right amount. However, boys are also far more likely than girls to say that they take far too much exercise than they feel is healthy. Research suggests that parents, particularly fathers, may influence their sons' exercise habits. Taking into account the fact that boys account for 4 out of 5 of those who say they take exercise to build muscle, it is notable that they also are more likely than girls to take body-building or dieting supplements, and there is a slight correlation between those who go to the gym or lift weights and whether they feel that they take too much exercise for health.⁶

⁶ Following analysis of these variables using Pearson product moment correlation, a positive correlation at 0.176 ($P=0.01$) was found. Those who take part in gym/weights are marginally more likely to answer that they take more exercise than they feel is healthy.

These statistics support the findings from other studies, which suggest that boys aspire to a more muscular body type and girls are more concerned with losing weight.

However, the current study suggests that the sexes do not seem to be equally likely to take effective measures to achieve these aspirations. Exercise seems to be less enjoyable for adolescent girls and they take less of it – even less than they believe they need. Body-image pressures and influences also appear to be less positive for girls, and they are more likely to avoid participating in a range of physical and social activities because of poor body image. In what turns out to be a vicious circle, girls whose body image does not measure up to social ideals may avoid taking part in physical activities, especially when those activities are explicitly aimed at making bodies fit those ideals. Therefore, a focus on obesity when promoting activity among young girls may, although well-intentioned, turn out to be counterproductive.

In line with the fact that boys are more likely than girls to exercise to build muscle, far more boys than girls also use the gym or lift weights and, as stated above, are also more likely to use artificial/unnatural body enhancers such as dieting aids or body-building supplements. Although lower than many other forms of exercise, gym/weights use appears relatively high, bearing in mind McSharry's earlier assertion that '*some of the Transition Year participants had joined gyms*' (2009b, p. 4, *emphasis added*). Gym use might also be viewed, as suggested by McSharry, as a development that is emerging as a result of an increasing focus among parents on individual body shape, size and performance, rather than as a form of exercise that is undertaken as part of a holistic approach to fitness and well-being.

It appears that gyms may increasingly be functioning as communal public spaces, with their own internal 'gym cultures'. But when used by young people, it must be borne in mind that these facilities are, in fact, private commercially run businesses, highly individualised in ethos and adult-oriented. Gyms usually lack any coherent connection with youth-oriented communal public spaces, such as youth clubs and schools, and their wider impact on young people has yet to be fully ascertained.

Effects of body image

Although the majority of participants in the survey say that they are satisfied with their body image, most also admit to feeling pressurised to look good for other people and to putting a lot of effort into their appearance. A majority of girls say they are motivated to exercise to control their weight and a small, but significant number smoke to stay thin, while more than 1 in 5 find it harder to go out, to date, to go swimming or to put photographs on the social networking site Facebook as a result of their body image. Significant numbers of boys also admit that their body image interferes with their participation across a range of activities. As stated above, although saying that they care less about their body image, boys are taking body-building supplements and may also find themselves taking excessive exercise in order to achieve a particular 'masculine' ('macho') body type.

It could be argued that the types of exercise taken by boys and girls result in unequal social benefits or protections. For example, social expectations around heterosexual masculinity encourage active, fit, strong bodies, and those who are seen to take part in activities that promote such body types are celebrated and feel powerful. Conversely, popular culture portrays

the ideal heterosexual feminine body as passive, thin and frail, and exercise that builds tone and muscle must be avoided unless the girl is willing to challenge this stereotype. As we have seen, however, girls feel far more pressurised to look good for others than do their male counterparts. Therefore, girls are trapped in another paradox: they must exercise to remain thin, but are also required to appear as if this comes effortlessly and not build muscle in the process for fear of not being attractive (to boys), being labelled unfeminine or perhaps even thought to be lesbian. Hence they must take particular types of exercise and take great pains to hide the effort involved, which perhaps explains why they do not enjoy the exercise that they do take.

In terms of everyday exercise opportunities, although walking and cycling are among the Top 3 most popular forms of exercise, fewer than 1 in 6 participants use exercise as a form of transport. This suggests that young people do not walk or cycle to get around, but may rely on other, more passive forms of transport, such as cars, buses and lifts from parents or friends, perhaps even to meet up with their friends to go walking *as a form of exercise*.

Suggestions to improve body image: Role of schools

As McSharry (2009a) points out, schools are the sites where adolescents learn most about their bodies and what is expected of them. However, most of this learning takes place in the school yard and not in the official curriculum, where the topic of body image is singularly absent. Although schools teach students about diet and physical education (PE) is part of every school week, the psychological and emotional components of body image are largely ignored.

A significant number of responses in the survey highlighted the role of schools in imparting information and in making schools more body image-friendly by, for example, making sports more exciting and varied, having regular talks on personal development and providing healthy food options in canteens and vending machines. Many suggested that schools need to incorporate body image into the mainstream SPHE curriculum and, where necessary, bring in outside experts to talk to students on the subject, as well as people who have themselves experienced eating disorders or body image-related bullying.

The SPHE Support Service has worked with Bodywhys, the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland, and with Dr. Majella McSharry, author of *Schooled Bodies?* (2009a), to develop lesson plans and a resource that can be used in schools to create a better understanding of body-related issues. The resource is called 'Bodywhys – A SPHE Resource' and is made available to teachers as part of SPHE training on mental health.

Bodywhys also offers free talks in schools to provide an understanding of eating disorders to second-level students, from 2nd year to 6th year. Its 'Be Body Positive' schools programme includes information about eating disorders, self-esteem and media influence on body image. In addition, Bodywhys also produces an information booklet for parents that covers issues relating to eating disorders.

As the Australian experience demonstrates (in its 2009 *A Proposed National Strategy on Body Image*), such measures can have an important effect on improving body image among those whose schools implement them. However, if such measures are at the discretion of individual schools to implement, their impact may be greatly reduced. If schools are to take on this demanding role, they need to buy into a holistic approach to education and traditional teaching practices and pupil-teacher relationships may need to be challenged.

Conclusion

The findings from this survey reveal a number of positive and negative aspects of body image among teenagers in Ireland and are rich with suggestions from young people themselves about strategies to improve body image among themselves and their peers.

It is clear that although young people on the whole report satisfaction with their body image, there are some clear departures from this mean. Body image rapidly declines throughout the adolescent years. Gender, too, appears to play a causal role in generating negative body image. External, or social, influences can impact positively or negatively on body image and while exercise, friends and family are cited as supporting a positive body image, there is a paradoxical relationship between exercise and body-image satisfaction among young people from both sexes. Overall, girls display lower body-image satisfaction, are more negatively affected by external influences (including comparison with others), put in more effort and are more likely to refrain from both physical and social activities because of concerns about body image. Body image is higher among males at every age, but it also needs to be borne in mind that there are specific social, and perhaps also psychological, barriers to admitting to body-image concerns among young males (including bullying). This research has highlighted a number of gender-based issues, such as teenage girls' exaggerated focus on weight and excessive exercise and the use of body-building supplements among young males. The strategies aiming to improve body image that have been suggested by the young people who participated in this research will therefore need to attend to age and gender – with appropriate gender- and age-specific responses.



Some useful resources

Aware

Freephone 1890 303 302; E-mail: info@aware.ie; Web: www.aware.ie

BeLonG To is an organisation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) young people, aged 14-23.

Address: Parliament House, 13 Parliament Street, Dublin 2.

Tel: (01) 670 6223; Web: www.belongto.org

Office hours are Monday-Friday, 10am-6pm. Appointments with youth workers can be made by calling the office.

Bodywhys: The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland

Freephone 1890 200 444; E-mail: info@bodywhys.ie; Web: www.bodywhys.ie

Childline Ireland

Freephone 1800 666 666; Web: www.childline.ie

Drugs/HIV Helpline

Offers support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to drug and alcohol use and/or HIV and sexual health.

Freephone 1800 459 459; E-mail: drugshiv@hse.ie; Web: www.drugs.ie

Gay Switchboard Dublin (GSD)

Helpline: (01) 872 1055; E-mail: director@gayswitchboard.ie; Web: www.gayswitchboard.ie

HSE National Helpline

Freephone 1850 241 850

Let someone know

Web: www.letsomeoneknow.ie

Mental Health Ireland

Lists a number of resources that young people can access for information and support if they are experiencing problems.

Web: www.mentalhealthireland.ie/links-mainmenu-23/38-children-and-young-people.html

Parent Line

Provides a completely confidential helpline for parents and guardians.

Freephone 1890 927 277; E-mail: info@parentline.ie; Web: www.parentline.ie

Pieta House: The Centre for the Prevention of Self-Harm or Suicide

Tel: (01) 601 0000; E-mail: mary@pieta.ie; Web: www.pieta.ie

+Options: Crisis Pregnancy Services

Freetext the word LIST to 50444; Web: positiveoptions.ie

Samaritans

24-hour Helpline: 1850 60 90 90; E-mail: jo@samaritans.org

St. Vincent De Paul

Tel: (01) 838 6990; E-mail: info@svp.ie; Web: www.svp.ie

Teenline Ireland

'If you need someone to talk to, we're here to listen. All calls are confidential. And you don't even have to give us your name. It is safe and secure. We're here to help.'

Freephone 1800 833 634; E-mail: info@teenline.ie; Web: www.teenline.ie

Open to talk 7 nights a week, 7pm-10pm

Women's Aid: Making women and children safe

Freephone Helpline: 1800 341 900; E-mail: info@womensaid.ie; Web: www.womensaid.ie

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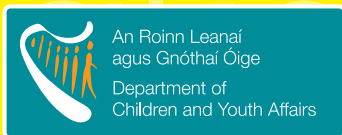
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